Understanding Violence in Latin America Today: Untying the Gordian Knot

by Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba

THE 2010 LOZANO Long conference, *Republics of Fear: Understanding Endemic Violence in Latin America Today*, which took place at the University of Texas at Austin on March 4–5, was a broad discussion on one of the most pressing issues in Latin America at present. Twenty specialists were invited to exchange reflections from a diversity of perspectives, which resulted in one of the most inspiring dialogues we have witnessed in our careers and showead that studying violence must be an interdisciplinary endeavor.

The discussion was based on the exchange of two main forms of knowledge or methodological approaches: while one sector of participants contributed quantitative data, the other approached the problem with interpretations of representations of violence. This is not to say that we have set positions toward the problem, but only that we have different methodologies and angles of approach. The conference, however, clearly revealed a desire for an open dialogue to define the main questions that would lead to an understanding of this problematic reality.

Indeed, violence is problematic from the moment we attempt to define it. Is it the result of recent economic processes? Does it originate in the failures of public policies? Can it be attributed to cultural factors such as gender structure and political customs? Emphasizing one perspective or another allows only a partial view; including a broad range of perspectives is what is required to untie the Gordian knot of violence in Latin America today.

The many topics addressed in this conference show the breadth and complexity of this phenomenon: gender violence; intimate violence; organized crime; political, state, and pro-state violence; structural violence (poverty, forced migration, racism, discrimination); and the responses to violence, including public policies, activism, and representations.

In the first panel, "Sexual and Gender Violence," Patrica Ravelo and Cecilia Menjívar addressed methodological issues to study the subjectivity of mothers of victims of femicides and of women affected by domestic violence. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, victims' relatives are key political actors in the public arena regarding violence, where pain is transformed into activism aimed to promote social change. It has been one of the most effective tools for intervention, instrumental in bringing cases to the international courts and in passing legal initiatives intended to ensure women a life free of violence. Menjívar, for her part, addressed the strategies of Ladina women in Guatemala who in their daily lives are transforming the victimizing gender structure of that country. Daily private life is the best space for antiviolence politics, although it occurs within a grid of asymmetrical power relations.

Ileana Rodríguez and Gloria González-López discussed the public implications of incest and the systemic violence that it constitutes. Rodríguez addressed media representation of incest scandal and its implicit endorsement in the public sphere, referring to cases published in the Nicaraguan media. Incest, she argued, is a privilege granted by patriarchy to the paterfamilias at the root of any gender-based violence, and patriarchy is reaffirmed in the private space. Gloria González-López underscored the frequency of incest stories in Mexico, which demonstrates

its systemic nature. All in this panel addressed the wide political and public interest in intimate and private victimizations related to gender and sexual domains. Far from considering gender and sexual violence as exceptional, these scholars reveal generalized, established, and largely supported forms of victimization. González-López asserts that this normalization of sexual abuse is one of the main obstacles to combating intimate violence. It challenges us to consider the cultural implications of sexual abuse, and the need to reinvent the political strategies to reduce the factors that foment this violence.

In the second panel, "Organized Crime," Ricardo Ainslie evaluated the state of fear the drug war has produced in Ciudad Juárez, which he calls a "traumatized city." He identifies three main factors contributing to this trauma: poor urban infrastructure, criminal violence, and police and army operations. Michael Lauderdale then presented on the impact of Mexican cartel violence on youth in Texas. Both papers show that drug-related violence should not be ignored as one of the main issues affecting sociopolitical, economic, and cultural life along the U.S.-Mexico border, and a larger discussion is needed to reconsider issues of economic development and collaboration in the areas of security, education, and social integration of the vast population on both sides of the border that have been directly or indirectly affected by this war.

The social accumulation of violence was the topic Michel Misse addressed by talking about Rio de Janeiro's delinquency and persecution by police. Misse explains these violent events by describing politics as an economic activity. For him, corruption, *clientelismo*, drug traffic, robbery, and exchange of prisoners between criminals and the police are transactions in this political market. In short, he regards violence as political capital. While Ainslie and Lauderdale look at the conflicts generated by organized crime as phenomena that have transformed social life and economics in the border region, Misse focuses on the use of violence as a political resource. If organized crime has an impact on economic and social life, it also can be considered as a commodity and an object of public debate.

The political use of violence in media and representations may not reflect the actual incidence of such violence, as Marcelo Bergman showed in his presentation in which he provided quantitative data showing Mexico had fewer incidents of crime than Brazil and Colombia. His overarching comparative account confirms, then, that violence is a concern constructed by representations, in that it acquires its political value as it induces the perception of a heightened incidence of violence. The study raises questions about the emphasis on U.S.-Mexico border violence by media and politics. Does it reflect the actual danger of the border area or just the political priority of this region for economic and political power? Are international consequences of high crime incidence in Brazil equivalent to those of the Mexican cartels in the drug-smuggling corridor from South to North America? Clearly, the geopolitical analysis of organized crime needs to be addressed in terms of international security and human rights considerations. Even though data presented by Bergman seem to play down the impact of criminality, at least in Mexico, which implicitly is inclined to support the interpretation of violence as political capital offered by Misse, considerations of human-rights violations and the spread of violent cultures must be a priority in public agendas throughout the continent.

In the panel "Violence and Representation," Lorraine Leu addressed the use of contested space in Rio de Janeiro by traffickers and popular sectors, describing the social conflicts expressed in the redrawing of urban spaces by drug traffickers and favela dwellers' tactics of resistance. The urban imaginary was also the topic addressed by Gabriela Polit in her literary and comparative analysis of Medellín and Culiacán, known as two important settlements of drug cartels. Both works point to the urban space as crime scene, but also as a site of artistic production in which violence constitutes a master topic, as a source of cultural expression and human experience that ascribes to literature and visual arts the role of raising social concerns. Artistic forms such as installation, performance, documentary, testimony, theater, and dance have been active participants in the dissemination of the awareness and the promotion of debates on violence. Donna DeCesare and Álvaro Restrepo participated as artists and educators. Their *ars poetica* is deeply rooted in ethics. Álvaro Restrepo promotes dance as a way of relief from violence. The photographic work of DeCesare is a microhistory of the Central American gangs' regeneration as one of the most significant consequences of civil wars. Both artists believe in the efficacy of art as a pedagogical tool for activism and community intervention.

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The initial panel on Friday, March 5, discussed state violence, with presenters focusing on two regions: the Southern Cone and Mexico. Daniel Brinks offered an evaluation of abuses by police in Brazil and Argentina, pointing to the inequalities of access to justice as a characteristic of new postdictatorial states in South America. Cecilia Ballí discussed the ways the Mexican army in Ciudad Juárez is practicing a form of masculinity in which the violation of human rights is a main feature. Jorge Chabat also addressed the topic of the war on drug trafficking in Mexico. As in Marcelo Bergman's presentation, his quantitative approach shows us how our perception of criminal incidence in this country is distorted. His analysis, however, also suggests we are far from seeing any decrease in violence. Elena Azaola offered a view from inside the Mexican police forces, explaining how the system works that corrupts and forces police to get involved in criminal activities, such as kidnapping. A web of complicity, blackmail, and betrayal keeps officers bound up in criminal

activities. The difficulty of reducing violence is tied to inequalities that criminalize the poorer sectors of society and to the performance of officers who convert the legitimate coercive force of government into a criminal organization. Violations of human rights by soldiers and police, as well as their participation in criminal businesses, de-legitimates official forces and impedes the decrease of crime in the region.

In the panel on political mobilization against violence, María Victoria Uribe commented on a documentary about the displaced people from Mampuján, Colombia. As in the panels on violence representations and gender violence, Uribe brought to the table grassroots-generated reactions to victimization. In this case, religion is a factor of cohesiveness and peaceful tactics for dealing with the armed forces that threaten Colombian towns. Angelina Snodgrass Godoy reflected on lynching as a response to the inefficacies of the Guatemalan state in the postwar period. Community-based resistance toward government abuses was one of the topics dominating a great deal of the conference discussion, as we saw in works by Ravelo, Leu, and the members of this panel. Most of these responses deal with the strategies of government to inflict its coercion and control of the population. In this sense, the work by Javier Auyero underlined the role of inequality in state violence as a form of institutional violence by describing the difficulties of disadvantaged Argentine populations in accessing public services. Gustavo de la Rosa pointed to the irregularities in constitutional guarantees and human rights in Ciudad Juárez, characterizing the government as a criminal institution.

Two opposing forces define the prevailing conflict that redraws the political arena in Latin America in the post–Cold War period. On the one hand is a diversity of environments and interests that foster violent activities: gangs and lynchings in post–civil war areas in Central America, the harassment of the poor in Brazil and Argentina, the conflicts between guerrillas and the paramilitary in Colombia, and the criminal organizations linked to officials in Mexico; on the other hand, communities have been creative and independent of traditional political institutions (i.e., political parties) in developing forms of resistance: religious manifestations, the taking over of public places, the replacement of state coercive functions by communal forms of punishment, and a myriad of aesthetic expressions that promote awareness and healing of social traumas.

Violence has motivated the emergence of new aesthetics and subjectivities that challenge scholars to rethink methods and languages. One issue that arose is the role of emotion when addressing this subject. Ravelo proposes abandoning emotionalism and sensationalism, since they can paralyze the process of addressing violence with rationality in political and academic debates. Nevertheless, we cannot discredit accounts by victims of abuses just because they exhibit emotions. The supposed objectivity of quantitative approaches to violence also has to be revised. Often, we hear the justification for omitting information because it cannot be generated or published. Most quantitative works are based on official sources, which, for topics like human right abuses and the participation of officials in crime organizations, may not be reliable. The fact that criminal events occur in a sphere of illegality limits the scope of the study of violence to testimonies and other narratives like media reports and literature.

One of the proposals of the concluding roundtable is that we need to address the genealogy of violence, since in the recent history of Latin America we can recognize a paradigm shift in the political arena, academic discourses, and artistic production, three of the main concerned sectors. At present, we are experiencing new forms of violence in our societies that demand we update our methodologies and databases and conceive innovative theoretical frameworks allowing a more effective production of knowledge on the subject. As we incorporate these emergent forms of violence into our research agendas, we also need to listen to the perpetrators as a key to understanding this phenomenon.

The political landscape in which violence is taking place compels us to consider that the problem of violence and criminality in Latin America cannot be separated from structural conditions such as poverty, economy, and segregation in which the state has a central role. In fact, there was a broad agreement among conference participants that governments regularly foster, tolerate, protect, and perpetrate violence against populations in most Latin American countries. How have these countries come to the point of being culprits and agents of complicity in the perpetration of violence? Distinctions between the public and the private have to be reconsidered, since much of the violence occurs in the private sphere while protected by public institutions, and is of public interest. If, as Menjívar and Ravelo propose, politics against violence emerges in private spaces and in daily life, politics can no longer be understood as solely a public affair. If society has responded to violence with methods and goals that surpass what is expected in institutionalized democracies, we can see that one of the most important social consequences of violence is the transformation of Latin American political culture itself.

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LLILAS TINKER PROFESSOR RAFAEL ROJAS WINS LITERARY PRIZE

In fall 2009, **Rafael Rojas** was awarded the I Premio Ensayo Isabel de Polanco for his book *Las repúplicas de aire. Utopía y desencanto en la revolución Hispanoamericana*, a study of the eight prominent figures in the formation of Latin American republics from 1810–1830. The award is made by the Santillana Foundation in collaboration with the Guadalajara International Book Fair and carries a prize of $100,000. The theme of the 2009 award was the bicentennial of Latin American independence movements.

Dr. Rojas, a specialist in Cuban intellectual history, holds a PhD in history from El Colegio de México as well as degrees from the Universidad de La Habana and UNAM in Mexico. He has published thirteen single-author books, among them *Cuban Intellectual History, Cuba mexicana: Historia de una anexión*, and *La política de adiós*, as well as numerous articles and book chapters covering the nineteenth century to the present. Dr. Rojas is a professor at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economicas (CIDE) in Mexico City. During spring 2009, he was the Tinker Visiting Professor at LLILAS.